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DE RUEHLM #1705 2891301
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4490
INFO RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1425
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 9499
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 6405
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 4456
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3248
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0062
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO 3339
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM 0402
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2420
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 6958
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 4799

UNCLAS COLOMBO 001705

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA SITREP: LTTE TRUCK BOMB KILLS OVER 60
SAILORS

REF: COLOMBO 1692 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (U) A Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) truck bomb exploded outside of the north-central town of Habarana on October 16, targeting a Sri Lanka Navy (SLN) convoy transporting over 150 sailors from Trincomalee. Radio news reported as many as 67 died and 150 sailors were injured when the bomb engulfed five buses. Later, a high ranking Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) military source told us he thought the death toll would reach 95.

¶2. (SBU) Habarana is 87 kilometers from Trincomalee, well into predominantly Sinhalese territory. A police source told RSO that military convoys regularly stop at restaurants in the area after passing through the LTTE-infiltrated eastern province, where they are more mindful of their security. According to our military source, the truck drove into a marshaling yard where sailors gather to get on transport. The attack caught most of the victims lining up to catch their buses. Samarasinghe told independent radio news that 90 sailors had been trapped inside the burning buses, and that civilians may have been among the victims.

¶3. (U) Some commentators believe the LTTE may have anticipated the October 16 Sri Lankan Supreme Court verdict (septel) declaring the 1988 merger of the northern and eastern provinces null and void -- effectively separating the LTTE's desired homeland into two provinces.

¶4. (U) It is also possible that the LTTE exploded the truck bomb in retaliation for the SLN sinking of a "Sea Tiger" supply ship on Sunday, October 15. The Sri Lankan Navy reported destroying an LTTE trawler loaded with arms off the northwestern coast of Mannar, 136 miles north of Colombo, after the boat's occupants returned warning fire. A military official told the Associated Press: "Considering the explosion that occurred on the trawler, we believe that it was transporting a large quantity of explosives and arms."

¶5. (U) Deputy military spokesman Major Upali Rajapaksa confirmed to pol FSN that a Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) kfir jet crashed into the Negombo Bay north of Colombo shortly after take off late afternoon October 16. The pilot successfully ejected before the aircraft went down. Major

Rajapaksa said there was no indication of an attack on the jet.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: The Tigers have not employed a truck bomb since 1996, when they attacked the Central Bank in Colombo. Should the death toll reach 95 as our source predicts, this attack will mark the single most lethal LTTE attack since the 2002 ceasefire. Observers are increasingly concerned about the prospects for holding peace talks on October 28-29 in Geneva as planned. The demerger decision and the truck bomb provide both parties with a justification, if they are looking for one, to pull out of talks.

MOORE